

[Sam Lewis]

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SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

Life History

TITLE "SAM LEWIS"

Date of first writing February 28, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Sam Lewis (Negro)

Place and Address Spartanburg, S.C.

Occupation Butler

Name of Writer R.V. Williams Spartanburg, S.C.

Name of Reviser

This is the story of an old Negro who has been cook, butler, gardener and librarian's assistant. He is Sam Lewis, and is employed at present as a handy-man in a private home in Spartanburg. He worked for twenty years in the Kennedy Free Library, and, at one time, was the only employee in addition to the librarian.

"I was born on February de twenty-fust," Sam said, "but I don't 'member what year. I was born on Major Hart's place in York County. My folks belonged to Major Hart in slavery time, and dey stayed on dere atter de war was over. I could find C. 10. S. C. Box, 2. 2 out from

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my sistah over dere just how old I is. She got it writ down in de Bible. All I knows is dat I'm in de sixties."

Same said that his mother died when he was eight years old and he remembers the coffin that Major Hart bought for her.

"I jus' don't member how dey worked de money mattahs in dem days, but us allus had plenty to eat. When I got old enough to work, us jus' kinda rented from de Harts. They furnished us wid mules and groceries and clothes, and us work on de farm. When lay-by time come, dey tuck out for de rent and what dey done give us. Sometimes, us raised 'nough cotton and corn to come out ahead wid some cash, and sometimes us come out in de hole if the crops is bad.

"Dere's one thing I sho' 'members well, an dat was de earthquake in 1886. I'se a pretty big boy. De Harts had jus' bought me new shoes. Shoes in dem days had brass around de toes of 'em. I sho' was proud of dem shoes. Us walked seven miles to York to see what de 'quake had done dere. I 'members us saw two stores wid the roofs caved in.

"Dat 'quake was a bad thing. When it come, I run out de house and got under it. Dat was a crazy thing to do but I was so scared dat I didn't think 'bout the 'quake mighten shake de house down on me."

Sam said that he came to Spartanburg in 1887 and went to work has a cook.

"I fust worked for Miss Webber, but she moved away [right?] after I come here. Den I got a job cooking for Dr. Rigby. De next job I had was when I went to Millwater, New 3 Jersey. I worked for a German up dere who raised flowers and plants fer a living. He didn't pay me but three dollars a week and my board, but I sho' learned a lot 'bout flowers from him. I'se been growing flowers ever since, and I'se made good money workin' in people's flower gardens. I think it was 'bout 1901 when I was dere, 'cause I knows it was atter de Spanish-American War."

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Sam said he remembers the day that the Spartanburg companies left for Florida because he had attempted to enlist on that day and was turned down for some reason which he does not know.

"I's o' wanted to go to dat war," Sam said. "Long time befo' de troops left, I went to de officers and I told dem I was a good cook. e tuck my name and where I was staying and told I'd git a lettah tellin' me when to come. I was workin' for Judge Nicholls on his farm, and I told dem to send de lettah out dere. I looked ever day for my lettah, but it nevah did come.

"De day befo' de troops left, I found out dey was going. I axed Miss Nicholls to git off so I could go to town and see de officers, and she brung me in de buggy. Den dey tell me I can't go, but I nevah find out how come. I sho' was one sad man when dat train pulled out from de C.&W.C. depo' dat morning.

"Judge Nicholls tole me atter dat, dat he was going to 'vestigate, but I reckon he was too busy to pay 'tention to dat. Judge was 'bout the best man I evah knowed. He had two sons 5 dat I had to take care of. Dey was Sam and Montague. You know dat Sam got to be Congressman befo' he died, and dat ontague was killed in de war. Dey tell me he was de fust man killed from Spartanburg in de World War. He fought with de Canadians long before us evah got into dat war. An' he got killed befo' us got into de war. He was de one dat allus was so crazy 'bout being so dress-up all de time. He allus had to have de best clothes of any boy in town. Dem boys got what dey call a 'lowance, and dey/ [??] some money evah week for keeping dere shoes signed and lookin' atter dere clothes. Sometimes it was jus' a few cents, den sometimes it was much as a dollar.

"I worked for Judge Nicholls till the farm was sold and de family moved back to dere home here. Den I went to work for Mistah Walter Montgomery, an' I reckon I worked for him for about five years, I jus' don't remember how long. I kep' up de garden and done jus' 'bout anything dat come up to do. One day, he tole me dat he would gib me a good

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'commendation for de library job, and he say it would pay me mo' money dan he was payin' me. I made jus' six dollars a week an' my dinner every day when I was workin' for him. I got de job.

"De library [kinda?] small when I come to work dere. I reckon I could haul all de books dey had in a two-horse wagon. I kep' de place and de grounds cleaned up. Dat was in 1908. I couldn't read or write at dat time, but I could read numbers. All de books had jus' numbers on dem den. I'd take de books an' put 'em back where dey belongs. Dem was de books what people tuck out to read. Den 5 I 'menced to mem'rize de names of de books by de color on de bindin' and de size of de books. I got so I could mos' find any book what anybody wanted even if I couldn't read or write. Den I started to night school, an' I kinda learned how to read and write. Miss Baugham, she my bess, she tell me to go to de school. An' I listened to how people talk when dey came to de library. Dat's how come I 'nounce some words bettah den others.

"I sho' is glad I ain't no librarian. Dey got to know something 'bout everything. People all de time coming in an' axeing 'bout something. You jus' axe Miss Baugham 'bout dat. She busy from mornin' till night trying to find out something for somebody.

"De library sprung up fast. Sometimes, somebody die and leave dem some books. Sometimes, folks would jus' gib dem books. Times come on to gittin' better, so de library could buy some books. It got so big dat dey changed de ole system from dem plain numbers to a kinda of code system. I nevah could figure it out. An' dey had to take on extry help, an' so many people started coming dat it tuck up all my time to keep de building in shape. Lots of dem flowers and shrubbery what you see down dere come from me. I jus' gib it to 'em.

"When I fust started working dere, sometimes de streets was so muddy in de winter time dat it would take me 'bout an hour to git to de library. I'd leave home at five o'clock in time to git de fire started. I'se never late to work de whole time I was dere. And I was nevah

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out 'count being sick 'cept one time. Dat 6 was in 1929. I got de chills, and I didn't work except off and on for 'bout three months. Sometimes, I made good money dere, and den sometimes I didn't. De depression sho' hurt us. De city and county cut down on what dey had been gibbing to keep up de library. Dat cut me down, too. But during de war, lot of dem soldiers from New York used to come down dere. Some of dem give me tips. Jus' hard to say what I did make down dere, but I reckon I made 'round nine dollars a week for the whole time I was dere.

"I sho' had tough luck in 1933. My wife died dat year. She been sick mos' all de time since our baby was born. Dat was 'bout 1902, as I'se 'members. De baby was born dead, an' I'll allus believe it was 'cause dat nigger doctor didn't know what he was doing. Little while befo' de baby was born, man come to me as say he is a doctor, and dat he handle the [?] cheap. He say he's jus' come to town, and dat he wants to build him a reputation. I don't know much 'bout dem things, but folks tole me he sho' messed things up when de baby come. I wish I had got me a white doctor. I had been working for Doctor Blake in spare time, and he told me later dat he would have done it for nothing. I reckon dat's 'bout de worst thing ever come over me.

"I left de library in 1938 'cause de board hired a man who couldn't do as much as I could, and dey was paying him more den I was gittin. I don't want to talk 'bout dat. But even day, I goes over dere and does odd jobs for dem.

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"My next job was wid de beautification people. I got dat job 'cause I knows so much 'bout flowers and plants and things. Den I tuck dis job here 'cause it ain't no WPA job, an' 'cause ever now and den somebody say WPA going to cut out. See dat big garden back dere. De boss done let me have dat to grow stuff in. De work here ain't hard. I does 'bout a little of all kind of things 'round here. I keeps de grass and de hedge cut and looks atter de shrubbery. I helps keep de house clean. I gits through 'bout three o'clock. Dat gives time to work in de garden, or to work in other people's gardens. I 'spect I'se pretty lucky. I ain't

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making so much right now in dis cold weather, but when warm weather comes, I'se hoping to make more money dan I ever have befo'.

Sam closed the interview with the writer with the promise of a bunch of flowers this Spring.